



# Latin Drumset Techniques

by  
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What we refer to as American music is really a synthesis of styles and influences from a variety of other cultures that have come together as a result of our historical development and evolution as a country. No matter what we may think of as being intrinsically American music—jazz, rock, funk, soul, pop, whatever—it all really developed through the meeting of various cultures. In our case the most prevalent influences have been the European (most specifically the Spanish, Portuguese, and French, as well as some northern European protestant cultures), various African cultures, and various Latin-American and Caribbean cultures (and I'm using these terms very generically). In reality every country's or culture's music pretty much developed the same way as ours—through a merging of various cultures—and though most countries are much older than ours, and many of these developments took place long ago, many still continue today.

Throughout our relatively brief musical history there have been periods of tremendous popularity of a variety of styles from abroad. There was a period in the twenties and thirties where the Danzas and the Cuban Danzón was very popular with the uptown "elegant set." There was a Mambo craze in the fifties, a Cha-Cha craze later took over, a Bossa Nova craze in the late fifties and early sixties, the CuBop thing in the fifties, and Salsa took over the Latin music industry in the seventies. For a while everybody seemed nuts about Samba and Brazilian music, and other styles such as Reggae, Calypso, and various South African styles have seen their heyday of popularity here. Today and in very recent years, the Cuban thing has come to the forefront and everybody and their mother—from major recording artists to local club acts—seem to be doing something Latin.

With this in mind the focus of this presentation will be on three of the most popular styles encountered by drummers beginning to play Latin music. These are the Cha-Cha, the Mambo, and the Songo. I think that with a solid control of these three styles one can cover quite a bit of ground because many styles—especially when played in non-traditional settings, as most of you will probably play them—have a tremendous similarity to one of these three styles. You could, *in a very general way*, create three broad categories into which you would place a number of rhythms and songstyles that would each share the rhythmic vocabulary of one of these three styles. Consequently, if you can cover and understand these, you won't find many others to be that drastically different.

Of course I'm speaking very broadly and *every* style has specific characteristics that make it what it is. Sometimes a seemingly insignificant detail is what actually defines a style as such, but this level of understanding requires a much deeper level of study and commitment. For most players not running around in the "heavy latin circles," simply being able to capture the basic character of a style will more than suffice.

For those of you who are inclined to study Latin American and Caribbean music in an in-depth way I'll take this opportunity to shamelessly plug my books which are available here on a show special at the Warner Bros. booth. You can of course buy them from your local retailer. The titles:

*The Essence of Brazilian Percussion and Drum Set*  
(comes with one CD)

*The Essence of Afro-Cuban Percussion and Drum Set*  
(comes with two CD's)



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## CHA-CHA

One of the most important factors to consider when playing Latin rhythms on the drum set is whether there is other percussion present and if so what it is. This factor alone will largely determine what you play because in pretty much all Latin styles, when you perform them on drum set, you are playing the role of one or more of the percussion parts.

At right are four basic patterns for this style. The first two would be used if there is a conga player present. The third and fourth would be used if there is no conga player present. Notice that these last two patterns contain the basic conga patterns played on the toms.

I mentioned in the introduction that other styles could be played with the same or very similar patterns. Of course you have to account for tempo, harmonic vocabulary, lyric content, and slight differences in certain patterns, but you could also play Guajira, Bolero (certain parts of the piece), and the ending vamp section of a Danzón with these patterns. You could also use them for any type of generic Latin ballad style or slower quarter-note pulsed style.

1.

2.

3.

4.



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## MAMBO

Here we look at various patterns for the Mambo style. Other styles that could be played with these or very similar patterns would be the Son-Montuno, Guaracha, or what some generally refer to as a Salsa style, although this is really not correct terminology. A Salsa band can be compared to an R&B band. An R&B band might play a funk ballad, a funk shuffle, a blues shuffle, a rock style thing, a New Orleans style thing, etc. Similarly a Salsa band would probably, in the course of a show, play a Guaracha, a Bolero, some Merengue pieces, a mambo, etc. So saying “let’s play a Salsa thing” doesn’t really say very much—except that you don’t know a lot about this music. But still, people do say this, and if you know what they mean you’re all set.

Patterns 1 and 2 present a pattern commonly referred to as *cáscara*. On the drum set this would be played on the hihat or on some wood sound (side or rim of floor tom). These first two patterns have both hands playing the cascara. On the timbales this would be played on the shells (also called “playing paila”). This pattern is commonly used in the low dynamic sections of a piece.

Patterns 3 and 4 are also *cáscara* patterns but they are now played with one hand (on the hihat or a wood sound) while the other hand either plays a basic comping pattern on the rim of the snare and the high tom, or the clave pattern. These patterns are used in the low dynamic sections of a piece and function exactly as the patterns above. You can also play these patterns on cowbells or cymbals if you were playing a jazz mambo style.

*Note: If there is a conga player do not play two strokes on the tom. Play only one on the beat.*

1.

2.

3.

4.



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The pattern at right is used for the high dynamic sections—choruses, solos, etc. The pattern is played on the mambo bell. This pattern is written out to include the conga drummer's parts on the toms. If a conga drummer were present you would *not* play this. You would simply play beats two and four (on the rim of the snare and the high tom respectively) or the clave.



## MAMBO COWBELL VARIATIONS

Once you have all of the previous patterns together try substituting the following cowbell variations for the main cowbell pattern in the example above. Practice these at a variety of tempos and dynamics, and on a variety of sound sources (cowbell, cymbal, side of floor tom)

1.		7.	
2.		8.	
3.		9.	
4.		10.	
5.		11.	
6.		12.	



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## SONGO

The Songo has become the one of the most popular Afro-Cuban styles these days, but in spite of its popularity it is really one of the most misunderstood styles. I encounter many students and players who think that the Songo is just a beat or a pattern. Often drummers learn one combination and are under the impression that this is knowing the Songo. This couldn't be further from the true essence of the style.

Songo is really more of a concept or approach than simply a series of patterns. It is truly an improvisational style incorporating elements of the Rumba and the Son traditions, as well as influences of jazz, funk and fusion styles that Cuba has assimilated from our musical exploits. The combinations that are most often referred to as Songo patterns are merely simple rhythmic structures upon which to build (arrange or improvise) more complex parts.

Think of the Songo patterns like you would the so-called jazz patterns. In jazz you have a basic ride cymbal pattern that is commonly referred to as the jazz ride. You might play beats 2 and 4 on the hihat along with this ride pattern. It is also common in some jazz styles to feather quarter notes on the bass drum and play rhythmic variations with the other hand on the snare. But this is not *playing* jazz. You don't play any type of jazz by merely executing this pattern. This is just the basic underlying structure, a framework to build on. Such is the case with the Songo. The patterns are just a takeoff point. *Everything else that you do with them are what really makes it a Songo.*

We begin with a basic pattern. Play this on the hihat, rim of snare, and bass drum. Once you're comfortable with it move your hands to other sound sources. Add 2 and 4 on the hihat.



## COWBELL/RIDE VARIATIONS

When you're comfortable with the pattern above try substituting the following variations for the cowbell





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## LEFT HAND WORKOUTS

The first objective will be to get your left hand freed up so you can improvise freely around the set with it. You eventually want to be able to play whatever you want and whatever the music is telling you to play. (Reverse this if you are left handed.)

### Workout 1

1.	5.
2.	6.
3.	7.
4.	8.

### Workout 2

1.	8.
2.	9.
3.	10.
4.	11.
5.	12.
6.	13.
7.	14.
15.	



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## MORE DEVELOPED PATTERNS AND LEFT HAND PHRASING AND IMPROVISATION

Having completed these workouts you should now feel pretty warmed up and pretty limber in this groove. The next step is to practice improvising phrases with the left hand while still keeping the other three limbs constant. In addition to free improvisation you should also try to come up with recurring phrases that could evolve into identifiable patterns and grooves. These would then be added to your repertoire of Songo material. Now you're starting to build a vocabulary in the style. Following are a couple of two and four bar examples of phrases based on left hand variations around the set along with the three basic ostinatos in the other limbs.





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## BASS DRUM VARIATIONS

Another issue that surfaces quite often in the learning of the Songo is the lack of emphasis on variations in the bass drum. While the bass drum does mostly play the basic ostinato written on the previous page as its fundamental timekeeping pattern, it can and should also be used as part of the rhythmic variation. This can be done in a couple of ways. The first would be to play a different bass drum pattern as the ostinato for a particular groove. The second approach would be to have the bass drum be part of the varying rhythmic line along with the left hand. This would result in a dialogue between the left hand and bass drum similar to what often takes place in certain types of jazz drumming. Following are some bass drum variations. Practice these while keeping the basic patterns in the two hands and the left foot.

1. [Musical notation for variation 1]

2. [Musical notation for variation 2]

3. [Musical notation for variation 3]

4. [Musical notation for variation 4]

5. [Musical notation for variation 5]

6. [Musical notation for variation 6]

7. [Musical notation for variation 7]

8. [Musical notation for variation 8]

9. [Musical notation for variation 9]

10. [Musical notation for variation 10]

11. [Musical notation for variation 11]

12. [Musical notation for variation 12]

13. [Musical notation for variation 13]

14. [Musical notation for variation 14]

15. [Musical notation for variation 15]

16. [Musical notation for variation 16]





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I shouldn't do any presentation on Afro-Latin music without a thorough discussion of the clave, but the time allotted for this session does not allow this. I will only mention that you must become completely familiar with the clave rhythms and all of their workings. Without this you will not be able to play this music the way it should be played. The clave is a very confusing issue for many. This is not surprising because it is often presented and explained in a very confusing fashion. At the risk of coming off like a bad infomercial I will once again direct you to my books because there is a thorough and clear presentation of all of this music there and I believe it one of the few you will find. At the very minimum, try to memorize the patterns presented here in relation to their corresponding clave and clave position. This will at least be a start in the right direction.

Working through these approaches in a methodical and concentrated way will give you a lot of facility with these grooves and help you begin to develop a stylistic vocabulary. You must supplement these studies with a lot of listening and analysis of the key players and ensembles of this tradition. This is critical for ultimately developing the right sound and feel. Learning any musical style is like learning a language and the only way to learn a new language correctly is by listening to those who really speak it well and then copying how they speak it. You must also seek out other players who are studying these same things and practice with them. There is much to be gained by practicing with someone else. You rarely play this music alone except when you solo, and even then you are often being accompanied. Practice with as many other instrumentalists or ensembles as possible.

Farewell for now and, in the words of a famous Jedi, may the clave be with you but more importantly, may you be with the clave.

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